Your notes

GCSE English Literature: revision notes

A Christmas Carol

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Plot

- **Stave** 1: Ebenezer Scrooge, a cold, mean moneylender, refuses to celebrate Christmas, turns away men collecting for the poor, and grudgingly gives his clerk, Bob Cratchit, Christmas Day off. The ghost of his dead partner, Jacob Marley, wrapped in chains, warns him to change and says three spirits will visit.
- **Stave** 2: the Ghost of Christmas Past shows Scrooge his lonely childhood, his sister Fan, the joyful party of his old employer Fezziwig, and Belle, who left him because he loved money more.
- **Stave** 3: the Ghost of Christmas Present shows the poor but loving Cratchit family and the sick Tiny Tim, his nephew Fred's party, and two starving children, Ignorance and Want.
- **Stave** 4: the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come shows people mocking a dead man whose belongings are stolen, the Cratchits mourning Tiny Tim, and Scrooge's own neglected grave.
- **Stave** 5: Scrooge wakes on Christmas morning transformed. He sends a turkey to the Cratchits, joins Fred's party, raises Bob's salary, and becomes 'a second father' to Tiny Tim, who does not die.

Themes

- **Redemption** and transformation, social responsibility, poverty and wealth, family, and the spirit of Christmas.

Context

- Published in 1843, when many Victorians lived in terrible poverty. The Poor Law Amendment Act (1834) forced people needing help into harsh **workhouses**. Thomas Malthus argued that population growth would outstrip food supplies, an idea some used to justify ignoring the poor.

- As a boy, Dickens worked in a blacking factory while his father was in a debtors' prison. He wanted to change his readers' attitudes to the poor.

Key quotations

- 'Bah! Humbug!' and 'Are there no prisons?' (Scrooge). 'Solitary as an oyster' (the narrator about Scrooge).
- 'A squeezing, wrenching, grasping, scraping, clutching, covetous old sinner!' (the narrator). 'Decrease the surplus population' (Scrooge).
- 'I wear the chain I forged in life' (Marley). 'This boy is Ignorance. This girl is Want.' (the Ghost of Christmas Present).
- 'God bless Us, Every One!' (Tiny Tim). 'I will honour Christmas in my heart, and try to keep it all the year' (Scrooge).

How to get top marks

- Treat it as an argument about society, not only Scrooge's story. Dickens wants his readers to feel responsible for the poor: Ignorance and Want are the book's real warning.
- Track Scrooge from 'solitary as an oyster' in **Stave** 1 to 'as merry as a school-boy' in **Stave** 5, and say how Dickens makes the change feel earned.
- Write 'Dickens presents' rather than 'Scrooge is'. Use the Poor Law of 1834 only where it explains a choice he makes.

Key terms

Stave	One of the five sections of the novella, named like the verses of a carol.
Novella	A short novel.
Redemption	Being saved from sin or wrongdoing.
Miser	A person who hoards money and spends as little as possible.
Workhouse	A harsh institution where the poor lived and worked in return for food and shelter.
Philanthropy	Helping others, especially by giving money to good causes.
Allegory	A story in which characters or events represent bigger ideas.

Quick questions

Cover the answers and test yourself: remembering is what makes it stick.

1. Why is the novella divided into 'staves'?
2. Who is Jacob Marley?

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3. Why is Marley's ghost wrapped in chains?
4. What does the Ghost of Christmas Past show Scrooge?
5. Who is Fezziwig?
6. Why did Belle leave Scrooge?
7. Who are Ignorance and Want?
8. What does Scrooge see with the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come?

Answers

1. Like the verses of a song, or carol
2. Scrooge's dead business partner
3. They represent the greed and selfishness of his life
4. His lonely childhood, Fezziwig's party and Belle
5. Scrooge's kind, generous former employer
6. He loved money more than her
7. Two starving children hidden under the Ghost of Christmas Present's robe
8. His own neglected grave

What to do next

Practise 12 questions on this topic

Try 4 exam questions, with mark schemes

Read the lesson, one step at a time

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